

This is the article that I recently wrote for *The Leaves of Twin Oaks*, our community periodical newsletter. I figured that it'd be good to put it on the O&I as a means of sparking discussion (hopefully no arguing) and not allowing these issues to fall by the wayside for people. I encourage comments and face to face questions and discussion - some say that this is the most articulate I've ever been about this issue, and I agree. If the interest is there, maybe we could have a sharing circle or discussion group to talk about some of the points and issues I bring up here or maybe some of their own? I'd like that.

Post 9/24
by Rachel
of course

WHY IS THIS PLACE SO WHITE?

By Rachelle Sadiq

DISCLAIMER: It is *not* racist to acknowledge cultural differences. Attaching a concept of right/wrong/superior/inferior to those differences is racist. It is possible to be racist without intention. You might also want to shake some of that white guilt off your brain before you read this.

Don't freak out, no one's gonna get "discriminated against" or become a victim of "reverse racism" or whatever that means. Have you ever stopped and wondered why, after almost 40 years of intentional living, Twin Oaks is still so white? I mean, think about it - right now we've got about 90 or so folks living here, and about 11 of those are not white. And while it's true that this number is a reflection of the national average, it is also true that there is absolutely no intention to that coincidence and that our other demographics (gender, age) are not meant to reflect any national statistic, but are instead meant to reflect an ideal of a utopic, intentional community. Twin Oaks has at times stopped accepting people of certain ages and genders in order to keep up these balances, so why not race as well? Recently, during a sharing circle about race and culture at TO, we brainstormed for explanations as to why fewer nonwhites are attracted to/stay at Twin Oaks, and the answers we came up with were pretty interesting. Some believe that the biggest obstacle that nonwhites face at TO are based mostly in our cultural norms, the biggest one being our nonviolent communication culture and our extensive and somewhat abusive family planning processes. There was a consensus among the nonwhites at the sharing circle that nycc is at its root classist (Who has the money for all those books and seminars? The knowledge/nature to handle the very complicated language and sentence structure of simply saying that you can't stand someone?) and also racist. We also mentioned smaller things such as the community's general intolerance for loudness and public expressions of extreme emotions that are based neither in happiness nor sexuality, our allowance, the food we encourage people to cook and eat, cleanliness, and our written/passive-aggressive cultures.

It became clear to us that we simply couldn't change a few policies and then the brown, yellow, and red people would start pouring in; we are gonna have to (gasp) work, and possibly (asthma attack) change our culture. Of course this is daunting! Historically, changing a culture has been one of the longest and bloodiest ventures any person or group of persons has ever taken on and, aside from the bloodshed, TO is no different: it took us five years just to dig a swimming hole! People shared their thoughts on how willing they would be to change themselves and TO in order to add some pepper to all this salt and of course the answers varied. For some, the issue of a racial balance wasn't as important, so they weren't willing to change much. Some felt that they would have to leave if they had to live with certain behaviors, and some were enthusiastic and ready for change. Some of course, felt that the issue was totally irrelevant, that Twin Oaks is not apart of the problem - one long term member even had the nerve to tell me once that I was "preaching to the choir", which is a big 'ole fib if I ever heard

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one. I believe that our secluded life and very unique culture at Twin Oaks contributes to the problem of cultural ignorance and the racism that is a result of that. This is evident more in the experiences that visitors, new members, and guests have here. There is room to be made to feel like you're totally fucked up if you don't know how we are used to people expressing themselves. It can be alienating and racist when you look at the type of person these issues continually come up with. Some have found moving here to be almost like assimilating, squashing the parts of you that are simply you and where you came from.

For me, a black girl from Mississippi that has had the word "nigger" spit at her way too many times (and yes, yes, I realize that I am lucky to not have had to deal with what my elders did), the flabbergasting and angering part of this process was trying to figure out why so few people *wanted* more black people here or thought that it was strange that we weren't making an issue of the obvious cultural imbalance in the same way that we regard gender and age. I tried to think about the origins of TO - the founders and their backgrounds. In the end, I don't really blame them, nor am I resentful that their concerns with race and nonwhite culture were pretty much non-existent. In 1967, they had plenty to worry about and no recruiting budgets. I don't even think that race is mentioned in *Walden Two*. But now, in 2006/7, we don't really have an excuse and you know what? It's pretty embarrassing. The entire communities movement has been coincidentally mostly a white one, with many nonwhite communities being either separatist or spiritual, which leaves very little space for the nonwhite person that wants secular and diverse communal living. And believe me, I really enjoy living in community, which is why I'm not content to simply move away. I also realize that because the big change that will have to take place is in the culture of TO, which is something that has been under development for almost 40 years, this process will be slow. People will be made angry, hurt, or happy; and some will move away. And even though I will probably not live at Twin Oaks long enough to see a total of 30 nonwhite adults living here or a black male come here and stay, I am not scared of this struggle, and it is not mine to bear alone. I don't feel like I should write about how I'm trying to speak at black colleges in D.C. for recruiting because that's not what's going to make the difference. The difference will have to come from the community as a whole, from our desire to practice what we preach, to make this an actual social experiment, to stay true to our purpose, as stated in our bylaws:

"In furtherance of these purposes the community shall endeavor to: eliminate hierarchical relationships between people; promote the practice of non-violence in personal, interpersonal, and political relationships; respect and preserve the natural environment for the use of all species, now and in the future; eliminate classism, racism, ageism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression, both within and outside of the community; practice community of property, with all those in the community sharing what they are, have, and can produce with one another."

Anything else is a lie.

POINTS FROM LAST MEETING ABOUT COMMUNICATION

- Sometimes white people may not understand the reaction people of color have to issues that feel racist to them because the white people have not had the negative history and background of racism
- How do we communicate when something feels racist and how do we receive that feedback?
- The hurtfulness may not be intended yet it has still been caused
- Being singled out and pampered at Twin Oaks as a person of color sometimes feels uncomfortable. Being complimented because of one's race feels uncomfortable. Objectifying
- Some people feel the core of their character is attacked if they are called racist.
- Need to find a way for those who are hurt to express that, to feel safe in doing so. But the ones who are hurt perhaps should not have to be the ones that confront it directly.
- Drop the label racist. Describe behaviors rather than label. Define it in context.
- Help people learn how to respond to being called racist.
- ...but focusing on language can derail the main problem and prioritize the person feeling defensive
- Should have mandatory mediation or at least mandatory to listen
- Do we want to add more specifics in our bylaws about racist actions/words?
- Process doesn't help with expressing emotion
- Mailbox letters may not be useful

QUESTIONS

1. What can we do to allow people from a wide variety of backgrounds feel comfortable here?
As a community
As individuals
2. From Rachelle's paper: "There was consensus among non-whites at the sharing circle that NVC is at its root classist and racist." Do you agree? Is this part of our culture contributing to our lack of racial diversity?
3. In what ways can calling someone out about racist comments/actions be difficult and what can we do about it?
4. In what can being called out on racist comments/actions be difficult and what can we do about it?

POINTS FROM LAST MEETING ABOUT OUR CULTURE/DIVERSITY

- Reinforce a diverse Society at Twin Oaks
 - We only seem to attract people of color that grew up in white culture [with a white parent]
 - We have a low threshold for allowing expression of anger
 - In order to help eliminate racism at Twin Oaks and the community at large we need more representation of people who've experienced racism. This brings more motivation and understanding.
 - Children need to be exposed to more people of color particularly people from a more solid black culture
 - Do we have a disturbing tolerance for Expressions that insinuate racism and symbols of hate that hurt some individuals?
 - Selecting for future members by teaching visitors to understand racism and our norms\ expectations, like a conversation like we're having here
 - We don't have enough recourse for support for people
 - Talk to people who recruit about recruiting more people of color
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QUESTIONS

1. How does our **process** limit diversity? (3-week visitor period, variable membership availability, structured labor system, etc....). What are the pro's and con's of changing any of these possible limitations?
2. How does our **culture** limit diversity? (NVC, allowance, food, disregard (and almost "dissing") of religion, family planning practices etc....)
3. What are our goals for our intentional community regarding racial demographics?

National demographics: 63.7% white, 12.2% African-American, 16% Hispanic/Latino, 4.7% Asian, 1.9% mix of two or more races...is this our ideal? If not, what is?
4. From Rachele's paper: "Twin Oaks has at times stopped accepting people of certain ages and genders in order to keep up these balances, so why not race as well?" How do people in the group feel about this idea?